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# The visual poetry in the film criticism of Ángel Fernández-Santos

## Abstract

Very often, it is difficult in the film criticism to distinguish the aesthetic principles of the films which are judged as excellent, non-standard or, even, masterpieces. Within the film criticism of Ángel Fernández-Santos, one of the most prestigious film critics in the history of Spanish cinema, ‘visual poetry’ is a recurrent concept that allows us to identify these principles. It is a term that, within his evaluative arguments, constitutes one out of three great stylistic strategies which, due to their difficulty and complexity when applied in the filmmaking, the critic tends to associate with the highest levels of the aesthetic quality. The other two strategies are the ‘transparency/depth dichotomy’ and the ‘expressive paradoxes’. In this paper, we focus on the film aesthetic patterns of Ángel Fernández-Santos in order to extract from his reviews only the definition, features and typologies of the visual poetry concept where it is clearly used. Those writings come from his journalist career in the newspaper *El País* (1982–2004), and they are devoted to analyse a range of audiovisual productions of different periods and styles; but before that, we will make reference to the origins and the application of the visual poetry concept in the legacy of the film theory and criticism with the aim of highlighting the influences that, (in this field) determine the aesthetic scope in the film reviews of Fernández-Santos.

## Keywords

Film criticism, film poetry, visual poetry, film aesthetics, film theory

## 1. Profile of Ángel Fernández-Santos and his aesthetic patterns

Ángel Fernández-Santos is one of the most influential and reputed critics in the history of Spanish cinema. His journalistic work, which spans more than two decades as a critic of *El País* —from January 1982 to July 2004—, constitutes solid aesthetic notions for critical reading of cinematography. We believe that such notions are still relevant for film reviews nowadays. Carlos F. Heredero, editor of *Caimán Cuadernos de Cine* —called *Cahiers du cinéma España* in the past— one of the most

important specialised film journals in Spain, considers Fernández-Santos an example of a professional who never stops adopting with inner rage, ethical and linguistic rebellion a stance

against the hoax and what is false, against the aesthetic imposture and false appearances, against servitudes or introductions of the market and against the condescending cessions of those who adapt more or less slyly to the requirements of the aforementioned (Heredero, 2007: 31).

The film review activity of Fernández-Santos started actually in *Nuestro Cine*, a Spanish magazine dealing with film review and analysis which is incorporated in December 1964 and which would remain until February 1971, when the closing of the publication takes place. It is important to mention the career of Fernández-Santos, as during this one two important phenomena in the film industry are produced: the introduction of Postmodernism and the progressive marginalization of film criticism in the mainstream press, as part of a global economic crisis that the media are going through due to the emergence of the internet. However, while these circumstances are taking place, the aesthetic pattern of Fernández-Santos keeps his intellectual strength undaunted, which does not become a stumbling block for opening an aesthetic view and consequently an interpretative elasticity.

The journalist focuses on the cinematographic experience based on the complex and contradictory nature, wandering and plural, of the seventh art, distrusting systems and tribes, avoiding bigotry and fundamentalism (Navarro, 2010: 63); but also taking into account that very often, and mainly due to the industrial condition of the cinema, economic, doctrinal, superficial or hypocritical motivations get together in the creation of a film production, the aforesaid motivations do not remain out of its process, but on the contrary, they go up to the surface, that is, its formal and semantic level, so that the protest in such cases, is obligatory (Cantavella, 2007: 222-223).

As far as we are concerned, Fernández-Santos possesses the qualities that should characterise every film critic. In his texts we find the three basic functions that Torrell (2010: 66) attributes to this journalistic genre: to inform, evaluate and promote. With his ratings, the journalist diagnoses the audiovisual landscape and argues with very well-shaped and independent criteria the values or counter values of the addressed works (Sempere Bernal, 2004: 13), always from the reflection of the components appearing in its audiovisual discourse and comparing their contributions with the history of cinema, schools, movements, trends, etc. In addition to his knowledge of the cinema language, Fernández-Santos fulfills another function attributed to a critical genre: establishing a singular literary style. His arguments are made by mixing formal and popular expressions, puns, idioms and sayings; showing precisely emotion, anger, sarcasm and irony when it is required. A personal and complex literary style without doubt.

Regarding his journalistic career, we can infer that Fernández-Santos highlights three aesthetic stylistic strategies which, due to their difficulty and complexity, he tends to associate with the highest levels of aesthetic quality when identifying them in the analysed films. These strategies are the following: the 'transparency/depth dichotomy', 'expressive paradoxes' and 'visual poetry'. We can also define them as 'transversal', as they are identified in different genres, historical periods, styles, sensitivities, etc. What we will analyse in the following pages is particularly one of these three strategies, visual poetry, and in particular how the critic combines this concept in his journalist work; in order to achieve this goal, we selected some extracts from different reviews published in the newspaper *El País*, but first, we would like to clarify briefly the other two strategies.

The transparency/depth dichotomy refers to a special film style characterised by the invisibility or lightening of cinematographic techniques, which emits however, high levels of depth in terms of effects and/or meanings. The term 'transparency' is an acceptance from

what Noel Burch (1987) calls 'Institutional Mode of Representation' (IMR), a set of formal parameters which enable him to define the American classic cinema. Transparency is, in a way, the essence of this set of parameters, which could be summarised in the following way: concealment of the denunciative markers, narrative causality, identification of the audience with the story and characters, privileged location in the diegesis and closed end. Therefore, the 'transparent' or 'invisible' narrative, entails the use of a limited number of technical features as a vehicle to transmit the information of the story; in this way, the film style is subject to build a coherent time and space (Bordwell, 1996: 163-164). Zunzunegui (1996: 121) highlights that the survival of this mode of expression occurs on the condition that the filmmakers use some conventions in an extremely flexible context. However, as we stated before, the conceptual leap that some filmmakers use within the limits of IMR consists of incorporating an emotional and semantic density that transcends this transparency or invisibility.

The expressive paradoxes constitute the second element within the transversal strategies that we are analysing, in other words, the set of conciliations that are produced between expressive categories or qualities, a priori antagonistic or opposing, through the creative areas of the film, this fact reveals a clear sign of stylistic complexity. Facing rigid expressive uniqueness and binary schemes from a linguistic point of view, often reproduced in art practice, the cinema with the highest aesthetic ambition aspires to reflect, in the words of Andrei Tarkovsky, a difficult contradiction: the ugliness in life is usually locked in beauty, so does beauty in the ugliness:

Life is involved in this contradiction, grandiose to the point of absurdity, a contradiction which in art appears as a harmonious and dramatic unit at the same time. The image enables the perception of this unity, in which everything is contiguous to the rest, everything flows and penetrates in everything else (Tarkovsky, 1997: 62).

The Russian filmmaker makes reference to Leonardo da Vinci in order to state that in his paintings the viewer can react with two contradictory positions. With regard particularly to the painting *Ginevra de' Benci* (1474-1478), the director of *Sacrifice (Offret, 1986)* argues that it is impossible to determine whether one likes or dislikes the portrayed woman, if one finds it nice or nasty, because it attracts and repels at the same time. He believes that there is something inexplicably beautiful and something decidedly evil in her: "Something that simply is beyond good and evil. A magic of negative sign that holds something almost degenerate and yet... beautiful" (Tarkovsky, 1997: 131). Whereupon, he finishes his explanation with such illuminating words: "A true idea in an image takes the viewer to a simultaneous experience of tremendously complex, contradictory and sometimes mutually exclusive feelings" (p. 132).

Consequently, the univocal clarity of meaning leads to a semantic/expressive process with a complex range of nuances. Fernández-Santos recognises during his critical career this conflict of opposing elements in some special films, hence its high aesthetic appreciation. It should be recalled at this point that this phenomenon is particularly fruitful in the postmodern cinema. As Imbert (2010: 17) points out, beyond the hybridization of forms, the break with realistic codes and with the closed character of film genres, a continuous blur of borders between what he calls 'symbolic categories' is produced: "identity is confronted with alterity, reality with fantasy, pleasure with pain, life with death". This appears in films that are located either within the limits of the dominant codes or in the margins: "between a fragile *entre-deux*, between life and death, pleasure and pain" (Imbert, 2010: 97).

The third expressive strategy that we will undertake in order to learn how it is used in the critical writings of the Spanish journalist is 'visual poetry', a term that Fernández-Santos

coined to designate those films featuring a special lyrical exaltation when representing feelings or reflections of proven intellectual depth. It is a type of cinema, therefore, tending towards introspection and the detailed study of moods, moving the audience to abstract territories. The acceptance of visual poetry has a long history within the History of Cinema. The efforts of some filmmakers belonging to the avant-garde of the twenties, such as Luis Buñuel, Fernand Léger, Germaine Dulac, Hans Richter or Abel Gance, consist of distancing themselves from the mimetic reproduction of reality, and creating visual compositions from rhythms based on music, dream or poetry.

With differences and nuances, Fernández-Santos still recognises this stylistic strategy in some directors and movies of his time. However, researchers and analysts often oppose to this concept of visual poetry when they try to specify the prevailing stylistic guidelines. Bordwell and Thompson (1995: 103), for example, locate the poetic cinema within the ‘non-narrative formal systems’, within the ‘abstract form’ and ‘associative form’ in particular: the first one displays a free montage of visual and sound qualities about what is represented; the second one entails a juxtaposition of images of different nature in order to create concepts or emotions. This classification is, certainly, useful in order to define the most experimental and art-house films, such as those directed by Stan Brakhage works, Oskar Fischinger, Norman McLaren, Dudley Murphy, etc; but it does not consider —although it mentions them— the poetic qualities of the ‘narrative formal system’ —following Bordwell and Thompson’s (1995) terminology— which is where the most common movies would be classified in the reviewing practice of the journalist.

In this regard, an interesting analysis about a kind of cinema that certainly could be understood as poetry is found in director Paul Schrader’s book, *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* (2008), dedicated, as its name suggests, to transcendental style of Yasujiro Ozu, Robert Bresson and Carl Theodor Dreyer, filmmakers who, broadly speaking, have the common denominator of representing the ineffable through the formal nude of reality, emphasizing boredom, silence and stillness. In the works of these filmmakers, audiovisual staging of everyday life appears emotionless, but only outwardly the outside, as through subtle signs the traces of what Schrader (2008: 63) calls a ‘gap’ emerge, an unresolved tension, “a crack that threatens the monotonous surface of everyday reality”. Human density lies under these disparities, this one becomes spiritual density as it is about the signals of emotion that come into contact with the transcendent sphere of human beings. These cracks are gradually creating an open wound that leads to “decisive action”, to “an explosion of spiritual emotion totally inexplicable in the everyday context” (Schrader, 2008: 64).

Fernández-Santos often links the poetic gallery of many eminently narrative movies to the management of a formal process, ritualized with small but accurate indications. In any case, two formal ways in the conjugation of that poetic cinema can be recognised in his critic work: one of them is joined to the dichotomy between transparency and depth, sometimes with very pronounced formal and stripping plot discourses, the other one is related to the convoluted joints of images and sounds. The first way would be closer to IMR, while the second one would be closer to Bordwell and Thompson’s (1995) ‘abstract form’ and ‘associative form’.

From these two formal options so opposed to create a poetic universe, an essentialist diatribe often tends to arise in the film review, in what concerns the aesthetical appreciation. This confrontation is perfectly illustrated in the controversy that involves the filmmakers Pier Paolo Pasolini and Eric Rohmer in the middle of the sixties, and which is collected in the book *Film poetry against prose film* (1970). In view of the emergence of the ‘new cinemas’ (waves in the 60s), Pasolini holds that a new poetic language is rising: the film must abandon its literary or theatrical substrate and assume a more appropriate stylistic mode to channel its essential poetic vocation, which he calls “free indirect subjective”,

where the director must formally mimic in the film the dominant psychological state of mind in order to achieve “an anomalous and provocative stylistic freedom” (Pasolini, 1970: 35). This new method gives rise to a technical code which is released from transparency, the camera starts to show through different resources, as alternating lens, zoom, backlighting, handheld camera, exaggerated travelling shots, “wrong editing for expressive reasons”, “irritating film joints” (Pasolini, 1970: 38–39). The director of *Theorem* (1968) attributes this new technical and stylistic trend to three filmmakers: Michelangelo Antonioni, Bernardo Bertolucci and Jean-Luc Godard.

Nevertheless, Eric Rohmer answers to these theoretical assumptions showing his disagreement in what concerns the linkage of modern cinema with the visibility of the camera, a phenomenon which is not a heritage of this kind of cinema and certainly does not help to clarify the true differences between classic and modern cinema. The French director argues that there is “a modern form of prose cinema and ‘narrative’ cinema, where poetry is present but not pursued beforehand: it appears as an addition, without being specifically requested” (Rohmer, 1970: 43). Unlike Pasolini, Rohmer advocates, then, a cinema where poetry arises from the shot substance, but in a surreptitious and spontaneous way, without using novelistic techniques. The creator of the series “Tales of the Four Seasons” feels closer to those filmmakers who were less concerned with the expressive techniques themselves than with the ‘shot thing’: “For them, the film is a means for knowing ourselves, for revealing us as beings, while for the ‘modern’ filmmakers, cinema would be basically a means to reveal actual cinema” (Rohmer, 1970: 44).

Although we believe that this debate is over, the truth is that, even without regulatory aims, there are different positions for and against each poetry approach. In the film criticism of Fernández-Santos a categorical stance is not found, as we find praises towards productions with poetic inclinations adjusted to both demarcations, however, expressive baroque movies run the risk of leading in excess evidence and in the superficial worship of visual fetishes of Modernity... which the critic tends to designate as a rhetoric use of the images. When the term ‘rhetoric’ is brought up in his journalist activity, it is related to the utilization of formal procedures in which superficial or frivolous aims underlie when such procedures reveal a penchant for the explicitness or the emphasis of expressive resources (‘communicative explicitness’); for the dramatic effects (‘sensationalism’); for the hollow mimesis of the predetermined stylistic features (‘mannerism’); for the false depth, solemnity or transcendence through grandiloquent and pompous gestures (‘pretentiousness’).

In spite of the two poetic options, equally legitimate, the truth is that we appreciate in the work of Fernández-Santos how often the poetic features of some films are denounced as they don’t suppose an authentic creative act, but a mere appearance of brilliance. Consequently, we can deduce that, according to him, the formal exuberance of images and sounds entail higher risks and dangers than simplicity and transparency in the search of dramatic complexity and depth. The film critic tends to highlight repeatedly the aesthetic difficulty of the formal elaboration through maximum simplicity.

This aesthetic reticence toward the unfavourable effects of expressive overload is still present in the film criticism of nowadays. In his review of *The Tree of Life* (Terrence Malick, 2014), the film critic from *Caimán Cuadernos de Cine* Àngel Quintana evokes this aesthetic double direction following the statements of Eric Rohmer in his book *From Mozart in Beethoven: an essay on the notion of depth in music* (2000), who highlights an opposition between the expressive conception of the two musicians: the first one is associated to the formal lightness without forcing it while in the second one a kind of heaviness that seems to proclaim the power of music, its aesthetic importance, is predominant” (Quintana, 2011: 11). From this approach he deduces that in the history of cinema there are examples where the dramatic depth comes from apparently inconsequential expressive frames, but also from other more overwhelming ones. According to Quintana, Malick’s movie would belong to the

second option. Finally, he concludes preferring —albeit he points out that this is a personal tilt— “the depth in the lightness than [...] the heaviness of a work of cosmic ambitions” (Quintana, 2011: 11). Hence, the aesthetic debate is still alive.

## 2. Features of visual poetry according to Ángel Fernández-Santos

On the other hand, as we have mentioned in the previous pages, Fernández-Santos makes use of the concept of visual poetry to name some movies which feature a special lyrical exaltation to represent feelings or reflections of proven intellectual depth, permitting the audience to transcend the surface of images and move to abstract territories. The ascent to these emotional and intellectual stages is carried out through a cinematic language of great stylistic complexity, which is split into two fundamental ways: one of them undertakes to the aforementioned transparency/depth dichotomy, sometimes with a very pronounced formal and plot stripping discourses; the other one entails convoluted joints of images and sounds. It is paramount to say that, because of this distance, the notion of visual poetry is often evoked to titles that the critic judges as excellent, non-standard, or even masterpieces.

The journalist uses the first acceptance to explain the poetic qualities of some of the greatest works of classic American cinema. In the case of John Ford, Fernández-Santos (1984) argues that, despite the epic cover of many of his films, there is a more intricate conflict on the myth of the lost paradise, that is, the breakup between man and earth; and the nostalgia, flavored with tragedy, which follows that imbalance, hence the adventure as a means to recover their origin.

The epic character in Ford's storytellings usually becomes fractured with the hidden presence of that tragic feeling. In *Fort Apache* (1948), Fernández-Santos (1982a) recognises an ambiguous approach in the political and psychological dissection of George Armstrong Custer —in the movie the fictional name of Owen Thursday is used—, Lieutenant Colonel of the 7th Cavalry Regiment —with an important share of responsibility for the extermination of several Indian tribes— and subsequently glorified in quite a lot American movies. In this film an apology for the character is found, however, his human and military failure is not shunned; his calculated ambiguity and reserve produces a crash between the whole and the nuance and, in the end, a political parable: “the rotten height of a little military pyramid” (Fernández-Santos, 1982a). As a consequence, this rending originates “the grave twilight tonality of the story: poetry and history are antagonistic expressions in *Fort Apache*, and the optimistic myth of the conquest of the American West shows bitterly its black and tragic back room” (Fernández-Santos, 1982a).

In fact, the journalist states that this lyrical inspiration is usually included in Ford's filmmaking with rhythmically organised signals in a calm *tempo* —what is called ‘cadence’ by Fernández-Santos—, pushing into the background, by the minute, the narrative dimension. This Ford's constant is connected with the basics of a movie such a *The Big Sky* (Howard Hawks, 1952), which tells the adventure of a group of men going up an unexplored river in a barge. But as the explorers advance towards their mission, the critic distinguishes, in parallel, a lyrical climb through three levels: the legendary character of the exploration itself beyond the frontier, an inherent rite in the deepest poetics of the Western cinema” (Fernández-Santos, 1986a) which becomes an allegory about life itself; the human relationships that are established, as a celebration of friendship and a sign of the joy of living; and the cultural understanding among foreigners —the white race— and the rightful inhabitants —the red Indian race— of that virgin territory. What John Ford's cinema and this Howard Hawks' western have in common is a lyricism that is prevailing progressively and where the emotional and dramatic functions of the image are difficult to demarcate.

Therefore, in this story —and some others of Ford— an accusation of the national epic of United States is made to the extent that the white colonization of the American continent

brings along the genocide of the Indian race. But, despite this demythologizing background, “a meeting between the white man and the Indian man, ridden of cultural elements and reduced to generous animals that, for the first time, they look into their eyes and recognise each other, like brothers” (Fernández-Santos, 1986a) takes place in *The Big Sky*, hence the wave of lyricism that emanates from the images at the same time that “the big skies are opened in front of the profanation of white men”. An emotion derived from, the reconciliation of the white race’s original sin with whom their victims were, explains Fernández-Santos.

Obviously, this poetic or lyrical nature of this film is also located in filmic styles with more complexity and formal purification, as in Yasujirō Ozu’s films where, from the perspective of Fernández-Santos (2007: 156), the distension of its narrative rhythm turns into *tempo*. The plot matter is a succession of very slow everyday events; apparently nothing happens, everything is quiet. But through this limited sluggishness of the narrative time, flashes of the main vector of the Japanese filmmaker’s films emerge: the flow of time as an allegory of the fleetingness of existence. This stylistic decanting, but with different dramatic horizons, shines in another Japanese director, Kenji Mizoguchi. For the critic, his best films are masterful exercises of lyricism: sentimental streams are undertaken with expressive procedures of great subtlety, as the ritualization of looks or the construction of the very slow narrative rhythm (Fernández-Santos, 1983).

That said, in his critical work, the journalist usually analyses productions that, as in John Ford’s and Howard Hawks’ examples, start out with a very specific narrative approach and gradually the alluded poetic rise takes place. Let us see carefully how this transformation is carried out: *Happy times* (*Xing fu shi guang*; Zhang Yimou, 2000) is based, from the point of view of the plot, on a dirty world, oppressive, but from the apparition of a blind girl onwards, the film takes off into unexpected poetic territories. Actually, the film begins with a comedy tone, but little by little it introduces the pain through a more documentary perspective. With the incorporation of that character to the plot —and his subsequent relationship with the protagonist—, an exploration of the urban reality, besides an exploration of her own personal identity occurs. From the duo created between the blind girl and the talkative elderly man, that social inquiry takes place in accordance with a camera which captures with delicacy and transparency that surrounding reality, and the mystery around the unresolved identity of the girl. The film radiates sentimentality, though its manifestations are embodied on the screen with exquisite modesty, as it is perceptible inside the calculated inner pace of the shots and their link as a whole (Fernández-Santos, 2002a).

In the same way, Fernández-Santos (1990) points out that *The King of the Children* (*zi Wang Hai*; Chen Kaige, 1987) is supported in a “mathematical discourse of filmed poetry”, as it passes “without emphasis, without any concession to the ease, without any underlining, without any resource of gratification to the spectator” (Fernández-Santos, 1990) However, the plastic composition of images and the inner rhythm emerge with such precision and delicacy that we gradually figure out the poetic cardinal issue, where “the threads that tie the composition of this complex and beautiful film are translucent: they are not seen. [...] Little by little, the viewers start to orient themselves among this invisible threads and feel that they presence the rhyme of a cinematographic poem”, this poem deals with the exaltation of the powers of imagination with the decoding of an ideogram drawn by a child in a remote school (Fernández-Santos, 1990).

Other times, the poetic substance is identified from the very beginning of the film, as in *The Straight Story* (David Lynch, 1999), which narrates the odyssey of an old farmer, Alvin Straight, who does not have the driving license and decides to make a trip of 500 miles on his lawnmower, from Laurens (Iowa) to Mount Zion (Wisconsin), to visit his brother who is seriously ill and to whom he has not spoken for a decade. Thus, the trip becomes a sign of

brotherhood of heroic proportions. Between the point of departure and the point of arrival, other characters appear with whom Alvin comes into contact, “a very lively painting made with the everlasting America's faces [...] that dies down far away like [...] the distant brother” (Fernández -Santos, 1999a). The screen is transformed as well, in a quiet place of serenity and clarity, this is the emotion that communicates the epic —but poetic above all— undertaking of the main character”.

However, the concept of visual poetry may often appear associated with the representation of darker intimate realities surrounding the tragedy. Again we must return to John Ford's teaching, the critic identifies that his denser works, such as *My Darling Clementine* (1946), *The Quiet Man*, *The Searchers* (1956), *The Man who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962) or *Seven Women* (1966), are imbued, as we have pointed out, with a twilight lyricism due to the tearing between men and earth, sort of an illustration of the myth of the lost paradise: all the people who settle in his cinema “are related, physically, almost viscerally, with the earth they walk on, but it runs through their fingers like spring water” (Fernández-Santos, 1984).

In *Fort Apache* (John Ford, 1984), previously mentioned, this tearing acquires even greater resonance because of the confrontation between the advance of the white frontier party and the last Indian resistance. Thus, the myth of the conquest of the West collapses with the exposure of their most bitter and tragic interlinings. Fernández-Santos (1982a) insists on the fact that this crepuscular lyricism is created through the laws of the symphonic composition, or in other words, through the cadence. It is important to remember that, from the point of view of the journalist, cadence alludes to the musical arrangement of the images of the film in this particular case to represent that lyricism. The film critic particularly thinks that this hidden beauty cannot be appreciated in *The Searchers* if “the secret musicality that appears in the long holding shots, in the subtle combination of the visual and sound stimuli, in the predominance of the cadence and the length of those specifically narrative” is not appreciated (Fernández-Santos, 1982b).

That said, in the work of the critic, these visual poems that run through gloomier landscapes are divided into those which come from endogenous factors, and those from exogenous factors: the first one is based on a sentimental flow derived from the personal circumstances of the characters; the second one deals with the historical, social or political circumstances. In the first case, we speak about titles related to the intimate sphere of the human condition, with their existing problems, suffering, psychological wounds, etc. In the second one, the flow of feelings is triggered as a precipitate in the confrontation between the individual and the political and social structures that support it, hence alienation, bitterness, nostalgia, etc. In both cases, they are works that exude conviction, truth and knowledge. Needless to say that the limits are not

With regards to films that respond to endogenous factors, *The Dead* (1987), John Huston's film-will, holds a special place in the journalist's career, where the awareness of death and the extinction of time are made image. The group of individuals who get together for dinner are the living representation of the inexorable fate of human existence, “a bunch of dead people living in Dublin but being now shadows with no house, no city, no country that supports the weak breath of the identity that they left behind, like smoke, the extinguished fire of one's existence”. Therefore, the critic defines *The Dead* as a dark requiem which, on the other hand, is made up from the simple narrative, balance and lyrical calm. Within its tragic nature, full of shadows, areas of light do also flourish (Fernández-Santos, 1988a).

Within this category of visual poems of a gloomier character, *Three Colors: Blue* (*Trois couleurs: Bleu*; Krzysztof Kieslowski, 1993) is a cinematic piece of high stylistic purity, as in spite of being apparently freezing, it hides a deep equation about chance, tragedy and the freedom of existence. The film tells the loss suffered by a woman after a car accident.



Despite this misadventure and her immense suffering, she is progressively led to the rediscovering of herself through its unquenchable thirst for freedom. In this way, the tragedy is seen as a trigger for his personal transformation, and pain as a source of freedom and meaning. The clarification of these issues through the magnetic look of Juliette Binoche, who plays the main character, produces a great emotion in the audience once glimpsed the deep knowledge encapsulated in the film (Fernández-Santos, 1993).

The reviewer, however, discovers most disturbing poetic territories in productions such as *The Piano Teacher* (*La pianiste*; Michael Haneke, 2001), in which he recognises that a matter like repression, or using his own words, “the inner castration”, seldom has it been depicted with such precision and foresight. Fernández-Santos (2001) refers to this film as a poem closed to what unbearable, that is subversive tragic outbursts of violence. The journalist highlights the collapse of hope by the force of the claustrophobic day of the protagonist and her depraved sexual practices, something which attracts our attention considering the civilised society to which she belongs to. Still, it is judged as an unprecedented artistic experience because, following Bertolt Brecht, it dares to reveal realities usually avoided by her discomfort. According to Fernandez-Santos, the Austrian filmmaker rescues “the glorious [...] idea of the screen as a glorious territory of restlessness and discomfort”, these qualities are inferred from the terrible moral basement in the setting around the main character, giving Isabelle Huppert life in a moving creation.

With respect to exogenous factors, we find titles which imply mood states, conditioned by, as mentioned, historical, social or political events. *The Pianist* (Roman Polanski, 2002) narrates the descent to the hell experienced by the Jew Wladyslaw Szpilman when he is reduced to human waste as a victim of the Nazi horror. Fernández-Santos holds that the polish filmmaker carries out an imposing story that

leads to a recovery for the current cinema [...] of the classic balance, of the transparent *mise-en-scène*, of the agreement between the plot and its visual formalization. Taken by the classic energy of *The Pianist* we slide [...] on the tracks of the slowly and inexorable descent to the hell of this world, which is the transformation of men into waste, into subhumans, into living carcasses (Fernández-Santos, 2002b).

The critic highlights then the classically inspired stage, almost silent, in the sense that eloquence comes from images and not words. It also highlights his amazing control in the graduation of horror, hence he appreciates the accurate and mathematical rhythmic configuration (Fernández-Santos, 2002b). In *After so many years* (*Después de tantos años*; Ricardo Franco, 1994), the sequel of *The Disenchantment* (*El desencanto*; Jaime Chávarri, 1976), Franco's film offers a new testimony of the same characters from the original film, the poet Leopoldo Panero's family, although he attempts to reflect on their faces and words the traces of time footprint and, in turn, how that generational disenchantment with the Spanish Transition drifts now towards melancholy and desolation.

Despite the bitterness, Fernández-Santos clarifies however that, *After so many years* approaches that wear on the relationship in a fraternal way, ennobling it and giving dignity to it. The work has a slow course of images where the imminence of death beats. Both the flow and the exquisite narrative rhythm reproduce the feeling of a stagnant movement, according to that dark radiography. The film features plenty of documentary material, but its combination on the screen is formalised as a poem of great purity about the disintegration of consciousness (Fernández-Santos, 1995). The passage of time that is watched on the face of the characters, the flow of the images and the rhythm of the editing generate that intense feeling of melancholy and desolation that is deduced from the movie.

The lyricism in these poetic films is usually managed through recollections and memories, as in *Kamchatka* (Marcelo Piñeyro, 2002) where the main character remembers

the following days of the military coup in Argentina in 1976 and the escape of her family from Buenos Aires to a place where they take refuge from political persecution. Fernández-Santos (2002c) does not hesitate to determine that the film adopts the poetic composition of an elegy, in other words, the form of a moan, in this case by “a collective tragedy of boundless proportions”. He also states that the film is composed by intense silences, gaps and suggestions —using the off-camera— and metaphors of great conceptual depth. All these features are coordinated with modesty and elegance, which converge in a poem of great emotional force where there are also different interpretations.

We have mentioned it at the beginning of this section, but it would be advisable to analyse further in detail a common attribute to these qualified poetic films: the meticulous rhythmic distribution of its sentimental flow under musical laws, the cadence, hence the use of terms as ‘ritualization’, ‘ceremonial’ or ‘liturgy’. From the film critic written by the journalist about *Latino Bar* (Paul Leduc, 1991), we extract this fragment that illustrates what we mean:

*Latino Bar* does not have music inside. It is music itself: visualised, danced, gesticulated, liturgically represented music, leading to a vigorous and high purity poem, never expressed verbally but exposed in front of the camera, which is also part of the music, accompanying the poem (Fernández-Santos, 1991).

At this point, we must recall that the cadence, a variant of the film *tempo*, requires an interaction script, *mise-en-scène*, and performance. Let us consider some examples. To narrate the last years of life of a philosopher and poet who uses the tea ceremony as an area of freedom in Japan in the eleventh century, *Death of the Tea Master* (*Sen no Rikyu: Honkakubô Ihun*; Ken Kumai, 1989) is constructed by a parade of faces and an emptying of the action whose images begin to originate powerful sensations and ideas, such as the rejection of power and the search for spiritual harmony. The narrow setting of the film suffers thus a grandeur, turning it into a universal space, hence its beauty and communication ability are the result of a formal device patiently composed (Fernández-Santos, 1989).

We can also observe the management of lyricism and narrative pace through two dissimilar works such as *Cows* (*Vacas*; Julio Medem, 1992) and *Dolls* (Takeshi Kitano, 2002). The first one involves a temporary period divided between two places: the first Carlist War and the Spanish Civil War a period that brings hate, rivalry and violence together between two family sagas whose feud continues through generations.

For Fernandez-Santos (1992a), Medem does a vigorous search of the intricacies of the tragedy of the Basque people, penetrating the roots of a fratricidal war. However, the way to tackle this story is not carried out through conventional narrative resources but through a tragic ceremonial, a poem that tries to represent an abstract substance, the mystery of family relationships where hatred is generationally perpetuated. The film eventually adopts the point of view of the cows grazing in the thick forest, this one acts as the junction between the two families, a point of view that gives rise to natural sounds and silences that are at the core of the rhythm running through the film.

From another perspective, *Dolls* also leaves the patterns of the narrative cinema with the aim of staging the tragic poem that gives rise to the film, *The Love suicide by Sonekazi*, written in the late seventeenth century by the Japanese playwright Chikamatsu Monzaemon. Using the traditional Japanese puppet theater as a central axis, the critic argues that Kitano organises a series of ritualized scenes through the temporal flow and a set of ceremonies, landscapes, shocking and interpretative gestures. The conclusion is an adventure of passion, sacrifice and death where a bewildering fusion of horror and love occurs in a state of absolute purity (Fernández-Santos, 2003).

### 3. Two different ways of film poetry

We have explained so far how Fernández-Santos adopts the concept of visual poetry and its two main thematic angles, which we classified according to endogenous and exogenous factors. We have also analysed the musical qualities that emerge in the rhythmic configuration of this kind of cinema. However, from a formal point of view, we divided the visual poetry into two procedures: one characterised by a formal and plot stripping from the transparency/depth dichotomy; and the other one by a complex joining of images and sounds. From now on, we will study this double track thoroughly.

Concerning the first one, a representative filmmaker is Iranian Abbas Kiarostami, his films are often based on anecdotal plot approaches and, subsequently, anti-narrative developments without rhetorical excesses where the most important issue is the musical ritualization of nature, landscapes, faces, spontaneous words, etc., apart from his documentary framework, they point metaphorically to matters of greater importance (Fernández-Santos, 1999b). *The Taste of Cherry* (*Ta'm and guilass*; Abbas Kiarostami, 1997) exposes, however, a much more relevant dramatic conflict, as it deals with a person who tries to find someone to bury him after killing himself. However, the film is a slow, serious and serene search on the puzzle that the chosen death encloses —suicide— as a sign of rejection against the surrounding reality and, at the same time, as a life-giving source, a rediscovery of life.

Two matters will not be unnoticed for the critic in order to consider the film as a metaphysical poem: firstly, the fact that suicide is considered the most serious of all crimes in the theocratic government of Iran; secondly, the different unresolved overtones concerning the reasons of the protagonist to end with his life, whose identity remains opaque. Fernández-Santos (1997) states that Kiarostami's film, of "Franciscan tradition" in what concerns his formal economy, requires, however, a very courageous vision if the audience wants to restore the edges of a complex cinematic poem with sublime elevation.

Eric Rohmer also stands out for his extreme formal economy —or for the unfinished nature of his device. The particular look of the French filmmaker, is described by Fernández-Santos (1986b) as "ascetic, undramatic and full of ground resonances" that can lead to the rejection, as apparently his works are a priori flat and boring. This is particularly the case of *Summer* (*Le rayon vert*, 1986), drawn without the usual drama codes from the point of view of the screenplay, but brimming with freshness and spontaneity in its narrative evolution and performances.

The film is shot in 16 mm., which provides it a patina of visual amateurism in line with the other mentioned features. This does not prevent the film beginning with a poetic ascent whose boiling point is the beautiful transformation taking place in the main character. The critic speaks of an imaginative crystal flight, invisible" (Fernández-Santos, 1986b), of the transition from a prosaic register to a poetic one which leads to one of the most luminous happy ends of recent cinema. Therefore, from the scruffy style of filming, from the naturalism of the performances and from improvised flow takes shape "the physical itinerary of a melancholic girl, wounded by the triviality and the loneliness, who in a magic moment of her way discovers that it coincides with a secret moral itinerary, with an intimate mutation and enlightenment that, suddenly, gives meaning to her life" (Fernández-Santos, 1986b). The musical resonances of these visual poems can occur, of course, through the orchestration of interpretive resources, like *Besieged* (*L'assedio*; Bernardo Bertolucci, 1998), a harmonious intertwining of space, movement, looks and silences of the two main characters, generating a series of delays and postponements in a ceremony about "the old and always unreleased game or scoring in the encounter between a man and a woman, who

don't tell their love for each other [...] but they reflect it by their actions" (Fernández-Santos, 1998).

This impulse to access the highest levels of expression with minimal visual and story baggage is embodied in two of the most daring poetic adventures of the nineties, according to Fernández-Santos, *The Beautiful Troublemaker* (*La belle noiseuse*; Jacques Rivette, 1991) and *Dream of Light* (*El sol del membrillo*; Víctor Erice, 1992), two films connected with the same matter, a journey through the intricacies of the process of pictorial creation. Both films manage to create an exciting event from monotonous if not tedious events —the artist in front of the model and his canvas next to him. On the one hand, Rivette's movie, with transparency, depth and incomparable elegance, investigates the mechanisms of the development of a painting, taking advantage of the emotional disagreements between the painter and his model.

The inability to capture the essence of what in art is reproduced imperfectly is also, in a sense, the core matter of *Dream of Light*, more austere than the one by the French filmmaker, as he manages an irrelevant anecdote. Although it might be classified in the documentary genre, it is located far from any category, such is its artistic importance with some of the most beautiful, original and indefinable moments in the Spanish cinema of the last years. Erice's camera testifies the impossibility of painter Antonio López to catch on his canvas the lighting changes of the quince of his study. We are, therefore, dealing with "the conjunction and combination of two utopias" (Fernández-Santos, 1992b), as if the project of the painter is doomed to failure, not least far from accessing to a presumed documentary truth, Erice's movie becomes a fiction that illustrates the impossibility to achieve a goal. However, from that chronicle of a failure, from a useless effort of the painter, escapes "the value of a conquest, a victory. And the artist's aesthetic failure becomes in this way an ethical triumph" (Fernández-Santos, 1992c). As an artistic adventure, the achievement of *Dream of Light* lies in raising at its peak the ideals of the transparency/depth equation, because it embraces "the absolute artlessness by absolute processing; and total simplicity through total complexity" (Fernández-Santos, 1992c).

The second formal procedure of this type of cinema defined as poetic is that where, despite getting into the same lyrical territory than the first procedure, it is also carried out in a refined formal elaboration, through convoluted joints of images and space-temporal structures, where obviously editing plays a basic role. Among the unequalled films of this poetic procedure are *Distant Voices Still Lives* (1988) and *The Long Day Closes* (1992), both directed by Terence Davis. The first one is a familiar deep introspection which takes place on a circular itinerary of a muddle of memories and recollections, with the use of traditional songs as a link in the flow of images. The film takes the form of a poem about the construction of identity through this call for times and family memories, which, constitute the manifestation of an interiority, a rough dream to see but full of tenderness. Despite this unconventional succession of images, Fernández-Santos (1988b) states that the film is completely transparent, as it reflects the complexities and difficulties of simple lives.

The second film, *The Long Day Closes*, follows a similar line, as it also deals with memories: the intimate spaces of a working-class family in England in the fifties this time. The journalist claims that this new film by the British filmmaker escapes from the orbit of its predecessor by offering more intricate metaphors. Nevertheless, it is still a ritualized elegy about child memories dominated by darkness and beauty, "invisible traces of emotions that run in the shade of an irretrievably lost and evoked time" (Fernández-Santos, 1992d). The ungraspable nature of the film is highlighted with the impossibility of verbalizing its plot, since there is no traditional logic of history, events, situations, characters, etc., but on the contrary, a musical conjugation that implies an investigation of the intricacies of film language.

He also considers a masterpiece of contemporary cinema *The Thin Red Line* (Terrence Malick, 1998), a revolutionary war film articulated through surprising monologues with several narrative voices. The critic argues that “the fracture of the word” is embedded “in a parallel fracture of the image”, an audiovisual assembly of extreme uniqueness in American cinema that goes beyond the mold of the narrative cinema, penetrating into a poetic composition of tragic lineage (Fernández-Santos, 1999c). Another monumental work that hovers over his critical journey is *2046* (Wong Kar-wai, 2004), a deep poem “of refined beauty and overwhelming lyrical eloquence, in the search of the dark areas of the mystery of love and its tragic transformation into heartbreak” (Fernández-Santos, 2004).

As many of the titles mentioned so far, he points out that this is a story whose silent music is generated through editing sets and continuously space-temporal jumps around. The film deploys from the figure of a writer and a series of encounters with different women in an enigmatic space where it is not easily discernible whether those thoughts, dreams and hopes that the person cannot handle are fictional or a nook of the memory. Still, according to the critic, this film is an exciting journey to the mystery of love but also to the mystery of living.

#### 4. Conclusions and discussion

The aesthetic basics that underlie in the assessments that the film criticism judge excellent, non-standard or, even, masterpieces are made clear in the prolix work of Ángel Fernández-Santos, one of the most recognised film critics in the Spanish film scene. After the analysis of his journalist work, we identify three great stylistic strategies that, because of its difficulty and complexity, are usually connected with the highest levels of the aesthetic quality: transparency/depth dichotomy, expressive paradoxes and visual poetry. These strategies are defined as transversal as they are identified in different genres, historical periods, styles, sensibilities, etc:

a) The transparency / depth dichotomy refers to a special discourse characterised by the invisibility or lightening of cinematographic techniques, from which high levels of depth in terms of effects and/or meanings emanate.

b) Expressive paradoxes are understood by Fernández-Santos as the set of reconciliations that are produced between expressive categories or qualities, antagonistic or opposing a priori, through the creative areas of the film, which reveals a clear sign of stylistic complexity.

c) Visual poetry is a recurrent term in critical writings of the journalist to designate those movies of a special lyrical exaltation representing feelings or reflections of proven intellectual depth. It is a type of cinema, therefore, aimed to introspection and the thorough study of moods, leading the audience to abstract territories.

The concept of visual poetry handled by Fernández-Santos dates back to the mastery of some filmmakers belonging to the avant-garde of the twenties, as Luis Buñuel, Fernand Léger, Germaine Dulac, Hans Richter or Abel Gance, who try to move away from the mimetic reproduction of reality by creating visual compositions from rhythms based on music, dreams or poetry. With differences and nuances, Fernández-Santos still recognises this stylistic strategy in some directors and films of its time. As opposed to Bordwell and Thompson (1995: 103), who locate the poetic cinema within the ‘non-narrative formal systems’, the journalist does assign poetic qualities to a lot of feature films linked to ‘narrative formal systems’ —following Bordwell and Thompson’s (1995) terminology—, that are the most common in the reviewing practice of the Spanish journalist. Often, Fernández-Santos links the poetic galleries of many eminently narrative movies like a formal process,

ritualized with small but accurate indications. In any case, two formal ways in the conjugation of that poetic cinema can be recognised in his work as critic: one of them starts from the dichotomy transparency/depth, sometimes with very pronounced formal and plot stripping discourses —*Taste of Cherry*, *Summer*; and the other one, entails convoluted joints of images and sounds, where the editing performs a special function —*Still Voices*, *The Long Day Closes*.

From these two opposite formal options, an essentialist discussion about which one is aesthetically more appreciated often tends to arise in the film review. Although we believe that this is an outdated discussion, the truth is that it turns out that, even without regulatory aims, there are different positions for and against of each poetry approach. In the film criticism of Fernández-Santos, a categorical stance is not distinguished. However, from his point of view, the exuberance in the editing of images and sounds can lead to an expressive baroque, excess of evidences and the superficial fetish worshipping of Modernity... which the critic tends to consider as a rhetoric use of the images. When Fernández-Santos brings up the term 'rhetoric' in his journalist activity, he links it to movies in which superficial or frivolous aims in its formal procedures underlie: when such procedures reveal a penchant for the explicitness or the emphasis of expressive resources ('communicative explicitness'); for the dramatic effects ('sensationalism'); for the hollow mimesis of the predetermined stylistic features ('mannerism'); for the false depth, solemnity or transcendence through grandiloquent and pompous gestures ('pretentiousness'). Consequently, we can deduce that, for the journalist, the way of the formal exuberance of images and sounds entails higher risks and dangers than the way of simplicity and transparency. The film critic usually highlights the aesthetic difficulty that the highest formal elaboration through maximum simplicity implies.

That said, in the work of the critic, the journalist associates visual poetry to those films of a special lyrical exaltation to represent feelings or reflections of proven intellectual depth, where these feelings characterise for a gloomy dimension from endogenous factors — personal circumstances of the characters, or exogenous—historical, social or political circumstances. In any case, generally one the main features in this type of cinema is related to the treatment of *tempo*. This type of cinematographic works shape that mentioned dramatic deep through subtle signals organised rhythmically into a calm *tempo* —what is called 'cadence' by Fernández-Santos, pushing into the background the narrative dimension —some movies of John Ford—, although sometimes this sluggishness of the narrative *tempo* is especially pronounced —the film style of Yasujiro Ozu. So meticulous is sometimes this rhythmic distribution that, according to Fernández-Santos, it tends to shape in accordance with musical laws, hence the use of terms as 'ritualization', 'ceremonial' or 'liturgy' —*Latino Bar*, *Death of the Tea Master*.

Therefore these productions do not usually characterise them by the explicitness and the underlinings, but by the intimacy and the delicacy: its poetic threads cannot be noticed because they are translucent, they are not easy to see at first sight —*The King of the Children*, *Summer*, this explains the term transparency/depth in order to name one of the two distinguished procedures concerning the making of visual poetry in the film criticism of Fernández-Santos. Generally, in the transparency/deep strategy the journalist perceives the impulse to access the highest levels of expression with minimal visual and story baggage, a very important feature in some of the most daring poetic adventures of the cinema of the nineties: *The Beautiful Troublemaker* and *Dream of Light*. On the other hand, the second procedures shares the same lyrical territory than the first one from a thematic point of view, and a refined formal elaboration; however, its stand-out element is the convoluted joints of images and space-temporal structures, in which the editing plays obviously a basic role. Fernández-Santos links these second procedures of visual poetry to cinematographic works that deeps into memories and evocations —*Still Voices*, *The Long Day Closes*, through a

flow of images provided with temporal leaps and different narrative voices — *The Thin Red Line*, 2046.

In conclusion, we consider that these pages leave open some ways which, from a double perspective, should be resumed in a future research. On the one hand, given the limited attention paid to the categorization of contemporary poetic cinema, this work proposes a basic taxonomy and finds out aesthetic patterns which enable some movies make semantic/expressive complexity and depth: a distinctive feature in the greatest cinematographic works. However, the truth is that those nomenclatures and expressive mechanisms can be analysed and specified further in detail in future contributions. On the other hand, the attempt to clear up the aesthetic value judgments that underlie the current film criticism constitutes other phenomenon that, because of its extent and original nature, may trigger new approaches to the way film valuations are made.

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